

In Memoriam

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Founding President of the Canadian Society of Medievalists / Société canadienne des médiévistes

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Margaret Wade Labarge, Polly to her closer friends, was the author of eight judicious and approachable books on medieval people both high and low. She was one of the first scholars to celebrate the broad cultural achievements of medieval women and was a champion of readable history. The founding president of the Canadian Society of Medievalists / Société canadienne des médiévistes, a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a member of the Order of Canada, and the recipient of three honorary degrees, she was renowned not just for her work on the Middle Ages but also for the boundless energy of her volunteer work on behalf of the elderly. She was, in the words of one fellow medievalist, “a woman of warmth, wisdom, and serenity.”

In her introduction to her first book, a biography of Simon de Montfort, Margaret praised Charles H. McIlwain and Charles H. Taylor, her undergraduate teachers at Harvard, and Sir Maurice Powicke, her mentor at Oxford, for their conviction that “the history of the Middle Ages can be both intelligible and fascinating.”¹ That conviction was one she held herself. I first met Margaret (I never felt quite up to calling her Polly) some thirty years ago at a lecture she gave at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies explaining how she came to write popular history. I was inspired, as were so many others, by her efforts to reach out to a broad readership without betraying the complexity of her subject. With characteristic modesty, Margaret attributed her decision to write for the non-specialist reader to the simple recognition that family responsibilities did not allow her to conduct sustained original research in the

1 Labarge, *Simon de Montfort*, x.

archives, leaving her to turn chiefly to published materials and concentrate on writing about them in as engaging a manner as possible. But the vision Margaret shared with her teachers went much further than making the past seem compelling for the general reader. As Naomi Griffiths, a long-time friend and colleague of Margaret's at Carleton University, said of Powicke, "His great strength as a scholar was a passionate belief in the individual's contribution to the life of the community."² It was a belief that Margaret herself held no less passionately, and it informed both her scholarship and her civic leadership. In her last weeks, her parish priest remarked in his eulogy, she was still chastising him because the Church was not doing enough for the elderly. She was no less determined in her writing.

Margaret received a strong grounding in medieval history as a high school student at the Sacred Heart Convent in Noroton, Connecticut, and then as an undergraduate at Harvard, but her career as a medievalist really took flight when she went to St Anne's College, Oxford, for her B.Litt. and persuaded Powicke, the Regius Professor of Modern History, to become her tutor. Margaret remembered vividly her first days at Oxford and how taken aback the condescending authorities at her college were when she told them she had already approached the great man and secured his consent, while they were still wondering who might be persuaded to supervise her. Margaret modestly attributed Powicke's decision to her earlier training and his desire to find someone who could read Latin and French to work on Simon de Montfort. Powicke chose well. Margaret's exploration of the quarrels between Henry III and Montfort was, as J. R. Maddicott notes, the first study "to give Montfort's private grievances the importance that they deserved."³ It formed the basis for her first book, *Simon de Montfort*, which appeared in 1962. Maddicott's expression of gratitude for Margaret's work can still be read inscribed in the copy of his own book on Montfort that he sent her, now in the Morisset Library at the University of Ottawa, noting that he followed in her footsteps and thanking her for both her book and the use of her "pioneering thesis."

It would take over twenty years, however, before Margaret completed the work on Montfort that she had begun at Oxford. While there, she met her future husband,

2 Griffiths, Introduction, *A Medieval Miscellany*, 4. The collection gathers together Margaret's chief published and unpublished articles. In the general introduction and the section introductions, Naomi Griffiths offers an extensive account of Margaret's career. Lisa Fitterman provides further information in her obituary in *The Globe and Mail*, published shortly after Margaret's death on 31 August 2009.

3 Maddicott, *Simon de Montfort*, xv.

Raymond Labarge. They were married in 1940 and moved to Canada, where Raymond worked for the federal civil service, rising to be Deputy Minister of Customs and Excise in the Department of National Revenue in 1965. Margaret's responsibilities as the mother of four children and the wife of a rising civil servant, together with her teaching as a sessional instructor at Carleton University and at the University of Ottawa, left her little time to write, but her family supported her efforts. She was also encouraged by her colleagues at the Pontifical Institute, Michael Sheehan and Ambrose Raftis, and by Bertie Wilkinson in the History Department at the University of Toronto, who helped her find a publisher for *Simon de Montfort*.

Once Margaret began publishing, a new book appeared roughly every three years. *Simon de Montfort* was followed only three years later by *A Baronial Household of the Thirteenth Century*, which drew on the household account books kept for Simon's wife Eleanor, countess of Leicester. The study showed Margaret's fascination with the ways in which medieval institutions actually worked and with the details of everyday life: the consumption of sugar and salt, the seating and lighting arrangements in the great hall, the cost of hiring a cart. Such information does far more than just satisfy an idle curiosity. As Margaret noted in her conclusion, "The patterns which guide men's lives are not merely constitutional or political; they are also, and perhaps primarily, social."⁴

Margaret's third book, published in 1968, was her biography of Saint Louis. Determined to rescue him from "pious sentimentality and nationalistic emotion," Margaret dealt with the full range of the king's administrative achievements, but also addressed his less attractive aspects, including his harsh treatment of the Jews, a subject she would return to in a much cited article in the collection *Le Siècle de Saint Louis*, brought out on the seven hundredth anniversary of Louis's death.⁵ For Margaret, Louis's character is ultimately best summed up by the term *prud'homme*, that is, "one who was both brave in body and also the faithful servant of Christ,"⁶ the term Louis said he most desired to have applied to him. She concludes, "Louis wholeheartedly admired this balanced ideal and sought to achieve it: his unshakable Christian faith flowered in an equally firm conviction of the monarch's duty and right to maintain untouched 'the rights of his subjects, the prerogatives of his crown, and the safety of his realm.'"⁷

4 Labarge, *A Baronial Household*, 185.

5 Labarge, *Saint Louis*, 249, and "Saint Louis et les Juifs."

6 Labarge, *Saint Louis*, 249.

7 Labarge, *Saint Louis*, 249-50, citing Berger, *Saint Louis et Innocent IV*, 2.

Margaret praised Louis's biographer Jean de Joinville as the one "who comes closest to summing up the whole man as his contemporaries knew him."⁸ It is perhaps this confidence that the whole medieval person can be known that most sets Margaret's work apart from more recent trends in academic historiography. Jacques Le Goff, in contrast, began his influential biography by asking whether it was possible to write a biography of Louis and whether Louis even existed, and although he eventually concluded that he did know Louis as an individual, that he could hear his voice and liked and disliked him for his various qualities, it took him fifteen years and 900 pages to reach that conclusion. More recently, Cecilia Gaposchkin has confined herself to the differing ways Louis was constructed by his contemporaries, answering 'no' to the two questions which Le Goff answered with a heavily problematized 'yes.' In both her teaching and writing, Margaret always maintained that while medieval people must be understood on their own terms, they *could* be understood.

In 1972, the National Gallery of Canada mounted an exhibition *Art of the Courts: France and England from 1259 to 1328*, displaying some of the splendours of gothic manuscripts, statuary, and vestments. At the invitation of the director, Jean Boggs, Margaret wrote a short study, *Court, Church and Castle*, to accompany the exhibition, tracing the connection between the art and the ideas of the period. Outside the classroom, this was the most direct challenge Margaret had received to present the Middle Ages to the general public, and with her extensive knowledge of the period and ear for a vivid anecdote, she captured "the bewildering profusion and complexity of a society in which the contrasts were as sharp and as startling as its own illuminations, and which can best be understood in terms of its own culture and way of life."⁹

In 1975, Margaret published her third biography, *Henry V: The Cautious Conqueror*, a study that grew out of her long-standing interest in French-English relations and her desire to offer fair treatment to subjects who had been buried beneath medieval and modern hagiography or vilification. Her study is the first sustained effort to consider Henry in all his dimensions, and not just as a soldier or administrator. It is exemplary, too, for its balance. Whereas K. B. McFarlane had called Henry "the greatest man that ever ruled England" and T. B. Pugh would dismiss him as "a man of limited vision and outlook," Margaret offered an account of a man who "had none of the more attractive virtues" but was "in the light of his own day, [. . .]

8 Labarge, *Saint Louis*, 249.

9 Labarge, *Court, Church and Castle*, 101-102.

an outstandingly efficient, able, and above all just king.”¹⁰ Twenty-five years later, in what is now the standard biography, Christopher Allmand would reach a similar conclusion.¹¹

In 1980, Margaret published *Gascony, England's First Colony, 1204-1453*. It was a natural development of her work on Simon de Montfort, whom Henry III appointed his lieutenant in Gascony in 1248. The work may also reflect something of her own experience living in St. Hyacinthe, south of Montreal, during the war, which offered her “a baptism by fire [. . .] in the realities of the French-English tensions.”¹² In a gripping narrative, Margaret traced the two and a half centuries of English rule and its broader implications for French and English history, not least the development of England as a maritime power. G. P. Cuttino, reviewing the work in *Speculum*, noted a few omissions and minor errors — for many of us, it will come as something of a relief that even Margaret could nod — but praised it as “a first-rate book, eminently readable, and one that will stand for a long time to come.”¹³

With *Medieval Travellers: The Rich and Restless*, which appeared in 1982, Margaret returned to her efforts to capture the lived experience of the Middle Ages by considering a wide range of medieval people, much as she had done in *A Baronial Household*: one encounters such figures as Bertrandon de la Broquière, head carving squire of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, who visited Jerusalem and then disguised himself as a Muslim and joined a caravan on its way from Damascus to Mecca but got only as far as Gaza before returning home via Constantinople, Belgrade, Budapest, and Basel. Bertrandon's desire to provide his master with accurate information for a future invasion led him to note geographical and ethnographical details — the order of procession for the caravan, how horses are shod in Damascus, how the Turcomans ate their yoghurt — of the kind that are so rare in medieval travel writing. While telling such stories, Margaret retained an eye for the broad patterns, noting that by the fifteenth century, protocol had become more elaborate and retinues larger, and that there were more signs of pleasure in travel.

10 McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights*, 133; Pugh, *Henry V and the Southampton Plot*, 145; Labarge, *Henry V*, 190.

11 Allmand sees Henry V as “the king who strove to provide his people with ‘bone et sage governance’, thereby seeking to fulfil both their broader hopes in him and his obligations to them”; Allmand, *Henry V*, 443.

12 Griffiths, Introduction, 5.

13 Cuttino, review of *Gascony*, 884.

In 1986, Margaret brought forth what was to become her best-known work, *Women in Medieval Life: A Small Sound of the Trumpet* or, to give its alternative title, *A Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life*. Covering the full spectrum of late medieval women, queens and peasants, nuns and widows, midwives and prostitutes, mystics and burgesses, she offered a triumphant demonstration that, despite the patriarchal ideology that circumscribed them, medieval women were “neither invisible, inaudible, nor unimportant.”¹⁴ Throughout the book, Margaret managed to capture the variety of women’s lives with vivid accounts of the sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu breaking the ice on the Seine to wash sheets in winter, or the spirited defence of Jacqueline Felicie, whose patients held her to be wiser than the physicians of Paris. As Denise Despres noted in her review, “only the most experienced writers and scholars can make so much information pleasantly accessible to a broad audience.”¹⁵

In a paper she delivered in 1987, Margaret summed up the transition heralded by her own work:

Much of the focus of earlier historians was on matters of constitutional, political and financial history, and in these public matters women normally had no place. However, as medieval historians have turned to a much closer examination of the less glamorous urban and peasant populations, rather than concentrating on individual kings, swashbuckling knights and powerful clergy, they have begun to realize that women were genuinely important in medieval life and not merely decorative presences at social occasions.¹⁶

Her interest in the rich complexity of medieval lives was no less marked in her treatment of powerful men in her biographies.

In 1995, in her presidential address to the Canadian Society of Medievalists, Margaret described the lives of medieval travellers as a “voyage from *pietas* to *curiositas*.” Throughout her writings, she endeavoured to do justice to both.

14 Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life* and *A Small Sound of the Trumpet*, 238.

15 Despres, review of *A Small Sound of the Trumpet*, 223.

16 Labarge, *A Medieval Miscellany*, chap. 1 “In Search of Medieval Women,” 19–34 at 19. Paper originally presented at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

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